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AUTHOR Franks, M. Eugene; And Others
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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on phase 1 of a four-part study investigating the exceptionally high dropout rate among a specific Native American population (the Mississippi Choctaw). The population for this study was the eighth grade class enrolled in the six schools operating on the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indian reservation. Researchers used the longitudinal method to follow all entering eighth grade students in the fall of 1984 for 3 years. The total dropout rate from Choctaw High School was 83%. Between the 8th and 9th grade and between the 9th and 10th grade, a greater percent of girls than boys dropped out; however, between the 10th and 11th grade and the 11th and 12th grade, a greater percent of boys dropped out. Forty-one percent (41%) of the eighth grade students were retainees. Of these students, 74% were retained once between 8th and 12th grade, 21% were retained twice, and 5% were retained three times. Further studies should explore what has happened to the students who did not graduate on time and identify unique characteristics of the dropout problem for Choctaw students. The study suggests severe instructional shortcomings; therefore, remedial and enrichment classes and summer school should be considered, and the policy of retention be researched. (KS)

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A PROFILE OF A DROPOUT POPULATION IN A NATIVE AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOL: A LOCAL PERSPECTIVE

Presented By

M. Eugene Franks,
Mississippi Band Of Choctaw Indians
Philadelphia, MS

Jim C. Fortune,
Virginia Tech
Blacksburg, VA

Doug Weaver,
Mississippi Band Of Choctaw Indians
Philadelphia, MS

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A PROFILE OF A DROPOUT POPULATION IN A NATIVE AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOL: A LOCAL PERSPECTIVE

OBJECTIVE

This paper is the first part of a four-phase research project sponsored by the Office of Planning, Research and Policy, Mississippi Band Of Choctaw [illegible]. **PHASE ONE** will investigate the exceptionally high rate of dropouts among a specific Native American population (the Mississippi Choctaw). It will define the scope of the problem, identify a population for study, describe the magnitude of the problem, and delineate the necessary data sources for further study. **PHASE TWO** will be the data collecting phase. The data identified for the study will be collected and cataloged for further analysis. Also a interview schedule will be developed, field tested and administered. During **PHASE THREE** the data will be analyzed and reports will be generated. This phase will also include recommendations and policy changes. The final phase, **PHASE FOUR**, will be the evaluation of the implementation of program and policy changes as a result of the study.

PHASE ONE - DEFINING THE SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM

The literature is replete with descriptions of predictors of "high-risk" student. This makes the myths and realities about dropouts are hard to sort out especially for Native Americans. Nevertheless the majority of the information suggests that most dropouts do not have low I.Q.s, are often two years behind their peers in reading and math skills, possess a very low sense of self-

esteem and by the time they reach the seventh grade they have been kept back for one or more years. (DeBlois, 1989) Further, students who have been delayed in their schooling or who are behind their age group (are overage compared to their cohort), tend to experience higher rates of withdrawal. Such delays are frequently the result of being held back because of language difficulties, learning disorders, or academic failure. (Hoffer, 1986) Finally, students who have intact families (two parents) are more likely to continue their schooling than are those who are from broken homes. (Rumberger, 1983)

Some studies have identified variables that can be manipulated by the school system and bring limited success. For example, success in high school can be affected by participation in extracurricular activities. Involvement in school activities also means that the student is less likely to have the time and opportunity to engage in activities that conflict with educational goals. (Wehlage et al., 1988) In addition, success in high school can be predicted by previous academic performance as reflected in grades. (Ekstrom et al., 1986) Academic performance acts as a proxy for the student's ability and measures effort. Low grades can lead to academic failure or to a sense of inadequacy, which can result in a loss of commitment to the goal of graduating from high school. (Velez, 1989)

While much of the literature points to variables that may be useful in predicting potential dropouts or identifying "high-risk" students few of these variables are amenable to policy changes.

Some of these variables identified in previous research include a number of school-related variables such as participation in extracurricular activities, academic performance, placement in an academic (college preparatory) track and grade retention. (Hoffer, 1986; Shepard & Smith, 1989) The focus of this project is to identify policy relevant variables that potentially can have immediate and long-term impact on Native American dropouts.

MAGNITUDE OF THE PROBLEM

Of all the major ethnic groups in American schools Native American students rank among the highest when it comes to dropout rates. In a recent study of the Albuquerque public schools, Native Americans demonstrated the lowest graduation rate at 52.4%. (Shainline, 1987) The problem is exacerbated for the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians in that the rural areas of Mississippi and Tennessee have some of the nations highest dropout rates (ranging from 50 to 70 percent). (Cavazos, 1989)

Despite the high dropout rates among Native American students, few studies have explored the determining factors that influence such behavior within this population. This project is designed to provide researcher and policy makers with accurate and valid information about Choctaw students that dropped out of high school.

DEFINITION

There are at least eleven different methods of computing dropout rates (Olson, 1988). Therefore, it depends on the method used as to the magnitude of the problem. For this study, a conservative method is used because it exposes the breadth of the

problem. What is known as the longitudinal method is used for this study. All students of appropriate age or grade at a specific point in time (Fall, 1984) were identified as a cohort. This cohort (all entering eighth grade students in the fall of 1984) was followed for five years (until the cohort graduated from the twelfth grade). The percent having dropped out at the end of that period is calculated by dividing the number of dropouts into the original number of the cohort.

This is a very conservative definition of a high school dropout and is not to be confused with the more common definition. Since students attending Choctaw schools also have the option to attend local public schools the issue of interest in this paper is the number of students "dropping out" of Choctaw schools. Information was not available as to whether these students re-enrolled later in a public educational institution. Therefore it is not known if they are "dropouts" according to conventional definition.

DESCRIPTION OF THE POPULATION UNDER STUDY

The population selected for this study was the eighth grade class enrolled in the six schools operating on the Mississippi Band Of Choctaw Indian reservation. These schools are located in rural, east central Mississippi and were operated by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Table 1 presents the enrollment of the eighth grade at each of the six school for the school year 1984-85. Choctaw Central is the only school serving kindergarten through twelfth grade. The other five schools serve kindergarten through eighth grade.

Beginning in the ninth grade students wanting to attend a Choctaw school must transfer to Choctaw Central. A dormitory is available for students wishing not to travel great distance each day.

As shown in table 1, forty one percent of the eighth grade students were enrolled at Choctaw Central, sixteen percent were enrolled at Bogue Chitto, fourteen percent were enrolled at Tucker, twelve percent were enrolled at Conehatta, ten percent were enrolled at Standing Pine and eight percent enrolled at Red Water. Table 2 presents the number of students enrolled by school during the 1988-89 school year.

The change in the number of students enrolled at each school by year is presented in Table 3. The total dropout rate from Choctaw High School during the years 1984 through 1988 for the 1984 cohort was 83%. The schools with the least dropouts were Bogue Chitto (67%) and Standing Pine (66%). The school with the highest dropout rate was Tucker (100%). The years with the highest dropout rate were between the eighth and ninth grade (51%) and between the eleventh and twelfth grade (41%).

TABLE 1		
STUDENT ENROLLMENT BY SCHOOL (FALL, 1984)		
SCHOOL	NO.	%
BOGUE CHITTO	15	16.1
CHOCTAW CENTRAL	38	40.8
CONEHATTA	11	11.8
RED WATER	7	7.5
STANDING PINE	9	9.7
TUCKER	13	14.0
TOTAL	93	100

TABLE 2		
STUDENT ENROLLMENT BY SCHOOL (FALL, 1988)		
SCHOOL	NO.	%
BOGUE CHITTO	5	31.3
CHOCTAW CENTRAL	4	25.0
CONEHATTA	2	12.5
RED WATER	2	12.5
STANDING PINE	3	18.7
TUCKER	0	0.0
TOTAL	16	100

TABLE 3					
PERCENT CHANGE IN ENROLLMENT BY SCHOOL					
SCHOOL	8/9 (1985)	9/10 (1986)	10/11 (1987)	11/12 (1988)	TOTAL LOSS
BOGUE CHITTO	-47	-9	0	-27	-67
CHOCTAW CENTRAL	-50	-21	-33	-60	-89
CONEHATTA	-64	-25	-33	0	-82
RED WATER	-57	+25	0	-50	-71
STANDING PINE	-33	-17	-40	0	-66
TUCKER	-54	-50	-66	-100	-100
SYSTEM AVERAGE	-51	-20	-27	-41	-83

ANALYSIS BY GENDER

The students were analyzed according to gender. The results are reported in tables 4 and 5. These results differ somewhat to reports of previous analyses of the High School and Beyond data where girls were reported to be more likely than boys to drop out of school (Peng, 1983). Between the eighth and ninth grade and between the ninth and tenth grade a greater percent of girls than boys dropped out. However between the tenth and eleventh grade and the eleventh and twelfth grade a greater percent of boys dropped out. Thus if a girl stays in school until the eleventh grade she is more likely than her counterpart male to stay in school.

TABLE 4										
STUDENT ENROLLMENT BY GENDER AND GRADE (1984-88)										
GENDER	8TH GRADE		9TH GRADE		10TH GRADE		11TH GRADE		12TH GRADE	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
FEMALE	36	45.5	17	42.5	14	40	11	40.1	7	43.7
MALE	43	54.5	23	57.5	21	60	16	59.9	9	56.3
TOTAL	79	100	40	100	35	100	27	100	16	100

TABLE 5				
PERCENT CHANGE BY GENDER PER YEAR (1984-88)				
GENDER	8TH/9TH	9TH/10TH	10TH/11TH	11TH/12TH
FEMALE	-52.7	-17.6	-21.4	-36.4
MALE	-46.5	-8.7	-23.8	-43.7

GRADE RETENTION AND DROPOUTS

Policy researchers have investigated the reasons and predictors for high school dropouts for many years and have found that family background and early school achievement predict tendencies to drop out (Natriello, 1987). Among the Choctaw people a recent study revealed that high school dropouts were more likely to come from homes where (1) high unemployment prevail, (2) high incidence of alcoholism, and (3) less English was spoken in the home (Fortune, 1989). While these and other reasons may prove to be helpful in identifying at-risk students they are factors that are

often the least effected (in the short term) by policy decisions. However, there is one policy relevant variable that is within the preview of policy makers and has proven to have a significant impact on high school dropout rates -- **grade retention.** One study reported that 'A student who fails either of the first two grades has only a twenty percent chance of graduating' (ACUSD, 1985; p.2) Using a well defined causal-model analyses of three large city school data sets, Grissom and Shepard (1989) report:

> Whenever high school dropouts and graduates are compared, it is always the case that a substantially larger proportion of the dropouts have repeated a grade. ... When student background, sex and achievement are controlled, there remains a significant effect for grade retention on dropping out. ... Even the most advantaged groups, those who are least likely to leave school, experience a practically significant increase in dropout rate when they are a year too old.

RETENTION OF CHOCTAW STUDENTS

This study identified 38 of the 93 (41%) students in the eighth grade cohort as retainees. Table 6 provides information as to the number of times students were retained by grade. As this table shows 28 (74%) of the students were retained only once between the eighth and twelfth grade. (Due to the unavailability of data it is not known if the students in this cohort were retained prior to the eighth grade.) Eight (21%) were retained twice and 2 (5%) were retained three times.

The age of the students was not available at the time of this study; however, observation of the pattern of grades repeated suggest that the students often stayed in school until they were of legal age to withdraw from school. This point is shown in Table 7. When students are retained once in the eighth grade and three times in the ninth grade there is room to speculate that the instructional program is wanting.

TABLE 6

NUMBER OF STUDENTS
REPEATING BY GRADE LEVEL

REPEATING	8TH (n=93)	9TH (n=46)	10TH (n=37)	11TH (n=27)	12TH (n=16)
ONCE	7	7	10	2	2
TWICE	0	7	1	0	0
THRICE	0	1	1	0	0
TOTAL	7	15	12	2	2

TABLE 7			
	PATTERN OF GRADES REPEATED		
FREQUENCY	FIRST REPEAT	SECOND REPEAT	THIRD REPEAT
7	8		
1	8	9	
1	8	9	9
1	8	9	10
3	8	10	
1	8	11	
6	9		
4		9	
1	9	10	
6	10		
1	10	11	
2	10	12	
2	11		
2	12		

CONCLUSIONS

The conclusions of this investigation can only be tentative due to the inadequacy of the data. However, even these tentative conclusions have important policy implications. The tentative conclusions are:

1. Of the 93 students that entered the Choctaw schools in the eighth grade in 1984 only 16 graduated on time - in 1988-89. This is an 83% attrition rate! This study was limited to data from the Choctaw school and therefore does not address the number of students that may have continued their formal education in a public or private school. However, indications from informal interview and other data source such as the Choctaw Demographic Study (Fortune, 1990) suggest that even when the 83% attrition rate is adjusted it will still be unacceptably high.
2. The highest attrition rate is between the eighth and ninth grades (51%) and between the eleventh and twelfth grades (41%). However there was variation among communities. Red Water reported a 25% gain between the ninth and tenth grades while Standing Pine and Conehatta reported no change between the 11th and 12th grades. Tucker reported the largest attrition rate. None of the 13 eighth grade students graduated from Choctaw Central High School within the five years of this study.
3. Students from Bogue Chitto and Standing Pine reported the lowest attrition rates (67% and 66% respectively).

4. Four percent more females dropped out of the cohort than males. Forty-six percent of the entering eighth grade was female and 54% were male. The cohort graduating class included 44% female and 56% male. However, between the eighth and ninth grade and between the ninth and tenth grade a greater percent of girls than boys dropped out. Between the tenth and eleventh grade and the eleventh and twelfth grade a greater percent of boys dropped out.

5. Forty-one percent of the entering eighth grade students were retained at least once during the next five years. Three-fourths of these students were retained once, 21% were retained twice and 5% were retained three times.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Three primary recommendations are made as a result of this study. First, 83% attrition rate is not morally acceptable. Further investigation needs to be done in an attempt to identify what has happened to the students that did not graduate on time. Second, this study suggest that the dropout problem for Choctaw students has some unique characteristics. Further study needs to be done in an effort to identify these unique behaviors. The second phase of the project needs to be put in place as soon as possible. Finally, this study indicates that there are sever instructional shortcomings for students attending the eighth through twelfth grades. (This was the first year in which the Tribe has had full control of its instructional program and there is evidence the great strides have been made.) However, programmatic changes such

as remedial/enrichment classes and summer school should be given serious consideration. In addition, such policy changes as grade retention should also be researched more thoroughly.

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